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# A Türkiye-Specific Model for Ending Terrorism: “Terror-Free Türkiye”

**NEBİ MİŞ**

Sakarya University, Türkiye  
ORCID No: 0000-0003-3257-5768

**ABSTRACT** *This commentary explains the basis on which the Turkish authorities launched a new political initiative, called Terror-Free Türkiye, which aims to end terrorism, and analyzes how its roadmap was created based on the experiences accumulated during previous resolution processes. It also examines how this process, which could be described as the Turkish model, has been carried out, unlike resolution processes worldwide. Accordingly, the origins and critical thresholds of the process, along with the role of the parliamentary commission, are included in this analysis to demonstrate that it amounts to an original approach referred to as the Turkish model. Last but not least, this article briefly discusses whether the goal of a terror-free Türkiye and a terror-free region is achievable.*

**Keywords:** Terror-Free Türkiye, Turkish Model, Peace Process, Conflict Resolution

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## Introduction

**T**ürkiye's fight against the terrorist organization PKK has a long and multilayered history. Over more than four decades, this counterterrorism campaign has spanned a range of domains, from military and security measures to international and regional power struggles, as well as the involvement of the organization's political extensions in Turkish politics. The question of terrorism has never been a purely security issue for Türkiye, as it has directly affected state-society relations, the democratization debate, the Turkish economy and investment, and foreign policy.

The terrorist organization PKK emulated the rising far-left ideology of the Cold War era in the 1970s, formally establishing itself in 1978 and carrying out its first act of violence in 1984. Until the early 1990s, Türkiye pursued counterterrorism through a heavily security-focused paradigm that included states of emergency, cross-border operations, and harsh military measures, which constrained, yet failed to permanently eliminate, the terrorist organization.<sup>1</sup> This situation gave rise to the argument that a security-centered approach alone was insufficient to end terrorism.

Efforts to end terrorism called for a multidimensional counterterrorism approach. As such, Türkiye's strategy was not historically limited to security-centered measures, but instead constituted a holistic framework addressing the political, legal, and

social dimensions of the problem. Especially from the 1990s onward, the argument that security-centered measures were insufficient for a lasting solution led Turkish authorities to seek alternatives. In this context, the country implemented reforms that complemented military and law enforcement operations against militants through democratization, respect for human rights, the expansion of channels for political representation, and the abolition of various prohibitions.

From the 1990s onward, the Kurdish question became a subject of political and society-wide debate in connection with terrorism, as several reports were prepared to analyze potential solutions.<sup>2</sup> The possibility of a political solution entered the national agenda under the leadership of President Turgut Özal, as the PKK announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1993. Yet Özal's untimely death in office, followed by the killing of 33 Turkish soldiers in Bingöl and subsequent acts of terrorism under questionable circumstances, prevented a lasting solution. It is important to note that the capture and repatriation of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 represented a turning point in Türkiye's fight against the organization. Following his arrest, Öcalan called for a cessation of violence, to which the organization adhered, resulting in some PKK members leaving Türkiye.<sup>3</sup> Although the PKK claimed to have ended its terror campaign between 1999 and 2004, it ultimately became clear that this was merely a tactical move.

Yet the true paradigm shift in the fight against the PKK took place in the 2000s, when successive AK Party governments implemented comprehensive democratization reforms in addition to resuming counterterrorism efforts. These reforms, introduced across multiple fields, resulted in Türkiye addressing cultural demands and expanding identity-related rights that had long been discussed within the scope of the Kurdish question.<sup>4</sup> During the same period, the public broadcaster TRT launched Kurdish-language programming, Turkish schools began offering elective Kurdish language courses, and the authorities took various steps to promote rights and liberties, starting with freedom of expression. As such, it became more difficult for the terrorist organization and its various political extensions to exploit the so-called policy of denial and assimilation.<sup>5</sup>

The first concrete outcome of the paradigm shift toward ending terrorism under AK Party governments was the National Unity and Fraternity Project, popularly known as the Democratic Opening Process, launched in 2009.<sup>6</sup> During this period, Turkish intelligence made indirect contact with the terrorist organization PKK regarding the laying down of arms in order to lay the groundwork for a political solution. However, the leak of the so-called Oslo talks posed a challenge to this process, which had been launched with good intentions.<sup>7</sup> Following this experience, the initiative was revised and carried out as the "Resolution Process" in a more comprehensive and systematic manner

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between 2012 and 2015.<sup>8</sup> During this period, the aim was to implement the process not only between the Turkish state and the organization but also at the societal level through several rounds of İmralı talks, Abdullah Öcalan's calls for disarmament, the withdrawal of PKK members from Türkiye, and the establishment of a Wise People Commission.

In this regard, the Turkish authorities sought to ensure the PKK's dissolution not only through military operations, but also by taking various steps within the context of democratization and by promoting social unity and solidarity.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, upon launching the National Unity and Fraternity Project, the government prepared a roadmap to ensure the success of this initiative, receiving feedback and comments as broadly as possible from political parties and non-governmental organizations alike. The official approach to the solution was made public as a result of these consultations.<sup>10</sup>

## President Erdoğan has taken significant political risks throughout his tenure as Prime Minister and Head of State to address Türkiye's longstanding, overlooked, and even chronic problems

On November 10-13, 2009, the Turkish Parliament held a comprehensive debate regarding all aspects of the disarmament process.<sup>11</sup> On October 1, 2012, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unveiled a 63-point roadmap for democratization, which was approved by Parliament as part of four judicial reform omnibus bills.<sup>12</sup> On April 4, 2013, the Wise People Commission, consisting of 63 members, shared its views with the public across Türkiye's seven regions and listened to citizens' concerns.

The Parliamentary Study Commission, established on April 9, 2013, prepared a 450-page report. Also in April 2013, the Ministry of the Interior and the Turkish General Staff signed an official protocol to create an administrative framework regarding the withdrawal of PKK members from Turkish territory. On July 15, 2014, the Law on Ending Terrorism and Strengthening Social Cohesion was published in the Official Gazette.<sup>13</sup> On September 1, 2014, Türkiye's 62<sup>nd</sup> government<sup>14</sup> reiterated its commitment to the success of the Resolution Process in its official program.

It is important to note that President Erdoğan has taken significant political risks throughout his tenure as Prime Minister and Head of State to address Türkiye's longstanding, overlooked, and even chronic problems. By implementing the most comprehensive reforms in the Republic's history to normalize and democratize Turkish politics, he oversaw various initiatives, including the Resolution Process, the Alevi opening, and efforts to safeguard the rights of non-Muslim minorities, amounting to what has been described as a "silent revolution."<sup>15</sup> During this period, Erdoğan's governments not only eliminated the obstacles faced by conservative and religious communities but also made a serious effort to end human rights violations.

Despite the consistent commitment of Erdoğan's governments and the Turkish authorities to finding a lasting solution, there has never been a shortage of disruptive, interventionist, and obstructive acts and political positions. Specifically, the violent Gezi Park riots began just as Türkiye was taking bold steps to expand rights and liberties. This was followed by the MİT trucks conspiracy, the December 2013 coup attempt by FETÖ-affiliated members of the judiciary and law enforcement, the October 6-7 events, the PKK's urban terror campaign that brought the Resolution Process to an end, and finally the July 15 coup and occupation attempt.<sup>16</sup> During this period, as the country faced systematic interventions from both within and abroad, some groups focused primarily on

whether these developments would benefit the government politically rather than on what they would mean for Türkiye's future.

Despite all these efforts, the terrorist organization PKK returned to violence, effectively terminating the Resolution Process by executing two police officers<sup>17</sup> in Ceylanpınar, Şanlıurfa, in 2015. This act of violence was followed by the PKK leadership's so-called declaration of self-rule, which led to an urban terror campaign involving the digging of "trenches" and the barricading off of certain neighborhoods in Eastern and Southeastern Türkiye. This move prompted the Turkish authorities to resume counterterrorism operations both within the country's borders and abroad, as President Erdoğan announced that the Resolution Process had been placed "in the fridge."<sup>18</sup> Particularly after the PKK took its terror campaign to urban centers, local residents distanced themselves from the declaration of self-rule.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), closely affiliated with the PKK, witnessed a notable decline in public support in the first national election following these developments.

From late 2024 onward, a new political initiative entitled Terror-Free Türkiye represented a continuation of this long history of struggle against terrorism. Yet it also built on past experiences, launched within a framework designed to facilitate legal and democratic measures following the complete termination of the terrorist organization, thus moving beyond

terms such as negotiation and resolution process.<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of the process, the authorities made it clear that this new approach would succeed only through the disarmament and self-termination of all of the organization's entities in Türkiye and abroad, not through negotiations, political bargains, or simultaneous reforms.

The Terror-Free Türkiye process was shaped by three factors in the broadest sense. First, Türkiye achieved military success in its fight against the PKK both within its borders and abroad. Second, the authorities made it abundantly clear from the outset that legal and democratic reforms would be implemented as a result of, not as a precondition for, the end of the PKK's terror campaign. Third, Türkiye committed to carrying out this process based on its own historical experiences and state capacity, as opposed to internationalized models of peace and reconciliation. In this context, the new political initiative designed to end terrorism was carried out through an original model.

### **The Strategic Framework of the Terror-Free Türkiye Objective**

The Turkish authorities launched the Terror-Free Türkiye initiative with a new approach at a critical juncture, when worsening global uncertainty, deepening crises, and rising geopolitical tensions in its neighborhood could directly impact Türkiye. Specifically, Türkiye needed to consolidate its home front, given the pos-

sibility that the war Israel launched against Gaza following Operation Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023 could escalate into a regional conflict, alongside tensions between Iran and Israel, the uncertainty fueled by their subsequent confrontation, the power vacuum that emerged in Syria after regime change, and Iraq's fragile stability.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the Terror-Free Türkiye initiative was launched at a time of historic weakness for the terrorist organization PKK.<sup>22</sup> In recent years, the country's counterterrorism campaign had been highly successful, curbing recruitment within Türkiye and seriously undermining the organization's ability to carry out attacks. At the same time, Ankara strengthened its cooperation with Iraq's central government as well as the regional government in Erbil, signing official agreements to that effect. Meanwhile, cross-border military operations severely weakened the PKK's control over parts of northern Iraq, making it difficult for militants even to access food supplies as their logistical lines were brought under control. It is also important to recall that targeted strikes against the organization's senior leaders made it increasingly difficult for the upper ranks to move freely. Likewise, the PKK ceased receiving the same level of support from regional powers and international sponsors, as it had become less strategically useful. Additionally, the AK Party's democratization program, coupled with its economic development, investment, and social welfare policies, narrowed the areas that the

PKK and its supporters could exploit.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the conditions for ending terrorism were put in place.

In this state of strategic constraint, the terrorist organization PKK concentrated its efforts on northern Syria, where it hoped to establish an autonomous administration through the PYD and the YPG.<sup>24</sup> Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the new government in Damascus and Türkiye agreed that there was no room in Syria for any armed group that jeopardized the country's territorial integrity or posed a threat to Türkiye. In other words, under the new realities in Syria, it became increasingly difficult for the terrorist organization to receive the same level of support from the United States, Iran, and Russia as in the past.

## Lessons Learned from Past Experiences

When the new Terror-Free Türkiye initiative was launched, the People's Alliance, both its leaders and its institutional members, refrained from calling it a new resolution process, instead insisting that this political approach focused solely on the PKK's disarmament and self-termination. Specifically, they made it clear that there was no room for any form of negotiation, preconditions, give-and-take, roadmaps, concrete demands, recognition of the organization as an interlocutor, or formal procedures within this new approach.<sup>25</sup> The concern was that creating such expectations, as in previous resolution pro-

cesses, would lead to complications through media coverage and public debate.

Such possibilities threatened to further complicate the issue at hand, causing it to expand over time, incorporating unrelated matters into the process, allowing non-parties to carve out roles for themselves, and facilitating disruptive steps by certain groups seeking to maximize their political interests. Therefore, from the outset, the authorities urged all relevant actors to act cautiously to mitigate the impact of disruptive attempts, to avoid statements that could lay the groundwork for sabotage through manipulation and disinformation, and to counter the harmful effects of the politics of "excuses."<sup>26</sup> Within the scope of this new process,<sup>27</sup> all groups were expected to exercise restraint in their public statements, given that the HDP and the PKK had derailed a resolution process in the recent past. At the time, the terrorist organization and its political extensions followed the agenda of global powers despite the goodwill of the government and other official stakeholders and their willingness to take the necessary risks. By sabotaging the resolution process, they sought to take advantage of the resulting situation. Since the process was deliberately derailed, however, it generated additional costs and new problems.

Historically, political parties, politicians, and opinion leaders affiliated with the terrorist organization portrayed the end of terrorism as a precondition for democracy. Over time,

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they conflated counterterrorism and democratization and advocated misguided views, for example, that "democratization is necessary to end terrorism," which made the counterterrorism campaign more challenging. At the same time, Türkiye had to delay democratic reforms due to the terrorist organization's violent and separatist activities.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it is important to note that Türkiye could have implemented its democratization program much earlier had it not been compelled to fight the terrorist organization for more than forty years.

Within the scope of the Terror-Free Türkiye initiative, the DEM Party bore significant responsibility to prevent potential attempts by elements of the terrorist organization to resist disarmament and self-termination and to undermine the process by provoking the general population.<sup>29</sup> It is important to establish that terrorism is a direct threat to any democratization effort. Whereas democracy promotes political struggle within legal limits and in a pluralistic and peaceful environment, terrorism seeks to define the political arena through vi-

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olence, rejecting pluralism and democratic principles. Across the globe, terrorist organizations and their supporters are known to reduce democracy to mere instrumental rhetoric.

In this context, the experience accumulated through previous resolution processes was highly significant.<sup>30</sup> Primarily, during the earlier resolution process, the power vacuum caused by the Syrian civil war created a window of opportunity for the PKK and its local affiliates. The tactical relationships that regional and global powers built with the militants allowed the terrorist organization to use the resolution process to gain time for strategic purposes. This, in turn, resulted in the expansion of the PKK's organizational capacity.

Secondly, the resolution process was heavily politicized by opposition parties, which deliberately brought security-centric and technical matters,

such as the laying down of arms and organizational dissolution, into the public sphere and everyday political exchanges. This course of action, in turn, rendered the process vulnerable to disinformation-driven and manipulative interactions. Therefore, the terrorist organization's dissolution and the goal of ending terrorism ceased to be purely security issues and became matters of political contestation.

Thirdly, the boundaries between the terrorism problem and the Kurdish question became blurred, as their respective domains could not be clearly delineated. This development, in turn, gave the terrorist organization and its political representatives greater discursive space. As such, they instrumentalized the divide between debates over identity, rights, representation, and democratization and the issue of terrorism for their own political purposes. As a result, the terrorist organization was able to present itself as an advocate of these political demands, which frustrated both the general population and the country's political leaders.

This time around, the Turkish authorities took stock of past experiences and drew their red lines at the outset. As such, the Terror-Free Türkiye initiative was portrayed as a matter of state policy rather than a government project, while efforts were made to prevent relevant parties from voicing maximalist demands.<sup>31</sup> Anticipating that these actors might resort to the "politics of exploitation" and other maneuvers designed to undermine

and derail the process, Türkiye developed a unique model.

## A Turkish Model for Ending Terrorism

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, terrorist organizations that engaged in violence for various reasons caused thousands of casualties worldwide. In the early 2000s, many such entities ceased their activities and initiated processes of self-termination, evolving into strictly political actors. During this period, organizations such as the IRA, ETA, the LTTE, and the FARC came to an end through different models.<sup>32</sup> In Türkiye, the question of how these organizations were dissolved repeatedly arose with regard to the PKK's potential dissolution, as opinion leaders debated whether the lessons learned from these experiences could serve as a model for the PKK's termination.

Terrorist organizations often emerge for ethnic, religious, or ideological reasons. Although their developmental trajectories, modes of organization within nation-states, and patterns of dissolution tend to share certain similarities, the differences between them are more pronounced. In addition to variations in the political systems, legal orders, and social structures of different countries, the fact that some terrorist organizations receive support from beyond national borders makes it impossible to follow a clear and singular model, a universal "recipe," for ending terrorism. Furthermore, localizing methods of

dissolution and termination makes it easier for policymakers to accurately forecast potential problem areas and facilitating factors.

The most significant aspect of the new political initiative launched by the People's Alliance under the name "Terror-Free Türkiye," and building on the experiences accumulated during earlier resolution processes, was the development of a Türkiye-specific model. The roadmap and methodology of the "Turkish model"<sup>33</sup> differed from global practices by identifying disarmament and the terrorist organization's decision to dissolve itself as the first step. Typically, disarmament was identified as the final step worldwide, requiring lengthy negotiations. Meanwhile, the dissolution of the IRA, ETA, and the FARC took longer due to the implementation of confidence-building measures, which prolonged the process, frustrated various social groups, and encouraged the public expression of maximalist demands. Indeed, in many cases the conflict reignited, and it took time for the parties to seek a peaceful solution once more.

Under the Turkish model, each subsequent step is implemented in line with the roadmap prepared by the relevant official bodies upon the successful completion of the previous stage. In particular, the authorities adopted a strategic approach to prevent global and regional sabotage attempts by limiting disruptive public debate and avoiding any perception of bargaining or give-and-take. Accordingly, they emphasized that Türkiye was deter-

mined to address this issue within its own constitutional order, in line with its social realities and state tradition. In this sense, the Turkish authorities clearly stated from the outset that there would be no place for a “third eye” or any international mediator or facilitator. Instead, the entire process was to take place under the authority and coordination of the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) as a matter of state policy.

When the general principles pertaining to the new political climate and the pursuit of reconciliation were established, the counterterrorism campaign was to continue, and there would be no softening of security measures. Accordingly, the authorities made it clear from the outset that the Turkish state would not compromise its security and would therefore continue its fight against terrorist organizations. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stressed this point by stating that “we cannot afford to be accommodating of those who praise violence, those who see violence as a means of seeking their rights, or those who seek to engage in political activities backed by weapons and terrorism.”<sup>34</sup> The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) chairman Devlet Bahçeli reiterated this argument as follows: “Terrorism is one thing, and politics is another. Turkish citizens, and above all, our Kurdish brothers and sisters, will find it very difficult to reach the level of human development, welfare, peace, and security they deserve until a thick line is drawn between terrorism and politics, until a wall is erected between them, and until weapons are excluded.” Sep-

arately, he insisted that “Türkiye will never bow to separatist terrorism, and attempts to impose negotiation or surrender will not succeed.”<sup>35</sup>

The roadmap and guiding principles of this process, launched by the People’s Alliance, sought to nurture a new political climate as a first step. The call for national unity and solidarity was intended to consolidate the home front as a priority. Secondly, the Turkish people were reminded at every stage of developments in the Middle East, which constituted a regional threat, and of the need to prepare for their potential impact on Türkiye. The third point concerned the political elite’s distinction between counterterrorism and the implementation of democratic reforms. As such, Turkish officials emphasized the need to address the terrorism issue and the Kurdish question separately, rather than in an intertwined manner, for the process to succeed. Specifically, public debate on democratization and other relevant steps would take place within the limits of the political arena and in a terror-free climate in Türkiye once terrorism had been brought to an end.

Fourth, all problems had to be analyzed from a national and collective perspective, and their solutions discussed in Parliament with a Türkiye-specific outlook and within a rational framework. Fifth, responsibility did not rest with any single party within the framework of this new window of opportunity. As such, all relevant actors, from political parties and the media to civil society and

academia, had to act with a national approach, refraining from pursuing personal or political gain in order to prevent any attempts to disturb the climate of reconciliation.

In addition to the above framework, another original aspect of the Terror-Free Türkiye initiative, which distinguished it from other reconciliation processes, was that it was further developed with a view to creating a terror-free region and serving as a foundation for a broader regional security architecture. In this context, the goal of a terror-free Türkiye was not limited to the country's own territory but simultaneously extended to the broader objective of a terror-free region. Indeed, President Erdoğan personally announced that Ankara would pursue a terror-free region upon achieving its initial goal of a terror-free Türkiye.

It is important to bear in mind that Türkiye conducted a series of major cross-border military operations in recent years to establish a secure zone beyond its borders. It also achieved significant success in removing terrorist entities from northern Iraq and northern Syria. In this context, the country made it abundantly clear, by adopting a firm policy, that it would not permit the continued presence of PYD-YPG terrorist elements within Syria's sovereign territory.

Türkiye also made considerable diplomatic efforts to increase the number of stable countries in the Middle East, striving to work more closely with fellow regional powers on counterterrorism. In this context, the

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country identified the removal of terrorism from the entire region as a concrete goal following the successful dissolution of the terrorist organization, the PKK. In particular, eliminating the PKK (along with its Syrian component, the PYD) and ISIS was considered vital to ensuring lasting peace in Syria.

### **The Process: Its Origins, Critical Thresholds, and Progress**

Speaking at an official ceremony marking the 953<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Turkish victory at the Battle of Manzikert on August 26, 2024, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emphasized the importance of unity and solidarity among Türkiye's 85 million citizens, placing special emphasis on social cohesion. Four days later, in an address on Victory Day, he warned of Israel's plans for a broader regional war and cautioned that such tensions could directly affect Türkiye. There, the Turkish leader insisted that regional crises could not permanently harm the country "as long as no breach is opened in the inner citadel."<sup>36</sup>

## Turkish state's new policy was to create a new political climate, to make a clear distinction between the terrorism issue and the Kurdish question in public discussions of the initiative, and to disassociate the end of terrorism from democratic reforms

In line with this risk analysis, President Erdoğan stated at the opening session of Parliament on October 1, 2024 in which “those seeking to collapse the home front” would concentrate their efforts, calling for a “consolidation of unity and solidarity” and highlighting the importance of “prioritizing areas of consensus rather than areas of conflict, at home and abroad, in the face of Israel’s aggression.”<sup>37</sup> The same day, MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli referenced Erdoğan’s speech and added: “I am confident that you will not permit attempts to transform political rivalry into political hostility within the tense atmosphere in which our region finds itself.”<sup>38</sup> Noting that a new chapter had begun, Bahçeli extended a hand of peace to the DEM Party, stating that “it is necessary to ensure peace in our own country as we demand peace around the world.” This attitude by the People’s Alliance leaders was widely interpreted as a sign of political normalization through the legislature.

Over the following weeks, the Turkish President repeatedly emphasized where “those seeking to collapse the home front” would concentrate their efforts, calling for a “consolidation of unity and solidarity.” He also insisted that reconciliation had to prevail over conflict at home and abroad in the face of Israeli aggression. In doing so, Erdoğan reiterated that the Israeli government’s actions also targeted Türkiye out of “religious fanaticism” and “the delusion of the Promised Land.” Regarding Tel Aviv’s future plans, the Turkish leader stated: “As we closely monitor Israel’s attacks in Palestine and Lebanon, we also see very clearly that it seeks to create a small satellite entity in both northern Iraq and northern Syria by using the separatist organization [the PKK] as its proxy.”<sup>39</sup>

Addressing the MHP’s parliamentary caucus on October 22, 2024, Devlet Bahçeli made a call to action, with unexpected directness, coming from the leader of a nationalist political party, regarding the goal of a terror-free Türkiye, noting that Abdullah Öcalan bore a historic responsibility to end terrorism.<sup>40</sup> This call to action constituted one of the most critical thresholds of the process, signaling Türkiye’s approach to dissolving the PKK by contacting its founder. In other words, the MHP chairman’s address transformed “Terror-Free Türkiye” from a mere wish into a concrete process.

In this context, President Erdoğan stated that “we cannot afford to be accommodating of those who praise



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan receives MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli at the Presidential Complex.

TCCB / MURAT KULA / AA

violence, those who see violence as a means of seeking their rights, or those who seek to engage in political activities backed by weapons and terrorism,”<sup>41</sup> while MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli drew a clear distinction between terrorism and politics, adding that “Türkiye will never bow to separatist terrorism, and attempts to impose negotiation or surrender will not succeed.”<sup>42</sup>

The following day, on October 23, 2024, PKK militants attacked the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ/TAI) campus in Ankara, killing seven employees. Despite this attempted sabotage by the terrorist organization, President Erdoğan and Devlet Bahçeli emphasized the beginning of a new chapter, reiterating, with reference to regional and global risks, their commitment to consolidating the home front, reducing in-

ternal fragility, and promoting unity and solidarity. They also outlined the guiding principles of a new political climate and the pursuit of reconciliation in their public speeches at various points in time.

The Turkish President clarified the purpose of the recently launched political initiative toward a terror-free Türkiye in his speech in Şanlıurfa on January 11, 2025.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, he identified several objectives: the terrorist organization’s self-termination, the unconditional surrender of its weapons, the elimination of the PKK’s tutelage over civilian politics, providing an opportunity to the DEM Party, which could not become a national movement due to pressure from the separatist organization, consolidating the home front in the face of escalating tensions in Türkiye’s neighborhood, and permanently

closing the half-century-long parenthesis of separatist terror in all its components and dimensions.

This new political approach, developed by the People's Alliance to end terrorism, was regarded by the vast majority of the general population and the political elite as a "historic window of opportunity."<sup>44</sup> The authorities presented the overall framework of the political and strategic planning of this approach, along with its roadmap.<sup>45</sup> According to this roadmap, the Turkish state's new policy was to create a new political climate, to make a clear distinction between the terrorism issue and the Kurdish question in public discussions of the initiative, and to disassociate the end of terrorism from democratic reforms. In this sense, the plan was to conduct this new process with collective reason and to allow the solution to mature in Parliament within a rational framework. Ultimately, it was clearly established that responsibility did not rest with the government alone, that all relevant parties, from political movements and the media to civil society and academia, had to act with the national interest in mind. Likewise, the authorities warned against efforts to disturb the atmosphere of reconciliation for personal or political gain.

Another point of emphasis was that this new initiative did not constitute a continuation of the previous reconciliation process. Still, the objective remained to end terrorism and to ensure unity and solidarity. During the previous reconciliation process, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan famously

stated that "if it means drinking hemlock poison, we will drink that hemlock poison, as long as this country attains peace and prosperity."<sup>46</sup> He reiterated this position within the context of the roadmap for a terror-free Türkiye. Likewise, MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli stated that "if everyone agrees on a future free of terrorism, then we are ready not only to put our hand under the stone, but our whole body."<sup>47</sup>

Once a positive political climate had been established, representatives of the DEM Party were granted permission to visit Abdullah Öcalan on the island of İmralı. On October 23, 2024, Öcalan reportedly told the so-called "İmralı delegation" that he possessed "the theoretical and practical capacity to move this process from a basis of conflict and violence to a legal and political framework under the right circumstances."<sup>48</sup> Thereafter, representatives of the DEM Party were periodically permitted to visit the island.

A historic turning point in the Terror-Free Türkiye process was a call to action by Abdullah Öcalan, entitled "Call for Peace and Democratic Society," on February 27, 2025, in which the PKK founder called on the terrorist organization to self-terminate and lay down its arms. Following their third meeting with Öcalan, DEM Party representatives read the text publicly. The essence of the statement was to urge the PKK to disarm. Öcalan, who had founded the terrorist organization, thus openly argued that it was time for the group to dissolve itself, including all affiliated bodies and units.<sup>49</sup> Finally, the state-

ment noted that the PKK needed to convene its congress to take the necessary decision.

Abdullah Öcalan identified three reasons for the terrorist organization's self-termination. To be clear, all three reasons reflected Türkiye's achievements in its fight against terrorism.<sup>50</sup> The first reason, the PKK's founder argued, was ideological: the collapse of real socialism. Although the PKK identified itself as a socialist-Leninist organization, it had long served as a proxy for capitalist powers, starting with the United States. In other words, ideology meant little to the group. Indeed, Öcalan's messages from the period of his imprisonment reflected a similar ideological theme.

The second reason was that the denial of Kurdish identity had already come to an end. It is important to note that the Turkish government's reform program, including the freedom to communicate in one's mother tongue, normalization with respect to identity, and the expansion of other rights, deprived the terrorist organization of opportunities to exploit grievances. As a result, the PKK found it increasingly difficult to mobilize popular support, recruit new members, and carry out propaganda activities. Even some DEM Party voters criticized their party, albeit not openly, over the PKK's acts of terrorism. Widespread discontent among the DEM base had a negative impact on DEM-affiliated politicians.

The third reason was that culturalist approaches, along with the pursuit of

**Turkish government's reform program, including the freedom to communicate in one's mother tongue, normalization with respect to identity, and the expansion of other rights, deprived the terrorist organization of opportunities to exploit grievances**

autonomy and federation on the basis of ethnic identity, failed to yield results. According to this view, organizations that took up arms against their own countries on the basis of identity and ethnicity throughout Middle Eastern history served as proxies or instruments of imperialist powers for a time. They enjoyed support from external actors as long as they were prepared to act as proxies and only until they ceased to be useful. By contrast, they were abandoned when circumstances changed and their shelf life expired. Over the last century, Öcalan argued, this same cycle has been clearly observed across the Middle East.

Following its founder's call to action, the PKK held its congress on May 5-7, 2025 and announced its official self-termination.<sup>51</sup> In the relevant statement, the terrorist organization used the term "shared homeland" for the first time, signaling that it

## The Turkish Parliament needed to debate key questions, such as the counterterrorism law, conditions of incarceration, monitoring the real-world progress of the handover of weapons, and the status of PKK members after laying down their arms

had abandoned its separatist agenda based on ethnonationalism. Following this decision, the group took an additional step with significant symbolic and psychological impact by holding a weapon-burning ceremony in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq (an area controlled by the Kurdish authorities) to demonstrate its willingness to disarm.<sup>52</sup> This ceremony conveyed a symbolic message, based on the metaphor of a wheel turning, that the process was moving forward, underscoring its seriousness and progress. After the ceremony, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other senior officials repeatedly announced that the “delivery of weapons” continued under the supervision of the National Intelligence Organization and other official institutions in a controlled manner.

### The Parliamentary Commission

Terrorism is a direct threat to any democratization effort. Whereas de-

mocracy promotes political struggle within legal limits and in a pluralistic and peaceful environment, terrorism seeks to define the political arena through violence, rejecting pluralism and democratic principles.<sup>53</sup> Across the globe, terrorist organizations and their supporters are known to reduce democracy to mere instrumental rhetoric. From this perspective, the Turkish Parliament needed to debate key questions, such as the counterterrorism law, conditions of incarceration, monitoring the real-world progress of the handover of weapons, and the status of PKK members after laying down their arms.

As soon as a new political initiative was launched for a terror-free Türkiye, opposition parties, starting with the CHP, insisted that Parliament should play a key role in the process by facilitating debate on proposed steps toward ending terrorism. They argued that the previous reconciliation process had failed due to the absence of a dedicated parliamentary commission. Later, when such a commission was established, members of the opposition spoke at length about its name, the number of members to be allocated to each political party, and the procedures by which it would reach its decisions. Indeed, throughout the commission’s work, the CHP and others repeatedly attempted to incorporate their own priorities, unrelated to the reconciliation process, into the commission’s agenda.

The parliamentary commission was established once the PKK began to lay down its arms. Following exten-

sive debate over what the new commission should be called, the members ultimately agreed on the name "National Solidarity, Fraternity, and Democracy." The commission, which brought together 51 parliamentarians from all parties represented in Parliament, except the İyi Party (Good Party), held nineteen meetings with officials, political party representatives, and members of various social groups from August 5, 2024 onward.

The commission's agenda was shaped by two main trajectories. The first axis concerned the public discussion of the content of speeches delivered at the commission in various contexts. In particular, some members affiliated with the PKK and the DEM Party argued that what the commission produced would determine the future course of the process. Yet it was easily detectable that this was not an appropriate approach to the solution method, judging by the commission's actual mandate and activities. After all, the commission's task was to make recommendations to the General Assembly, not to legislate.

The second axis concerned attempts to reduce the Terror-Free Türkiye process to the YPG issue.<sup>54</sup> Specifically, circles affiliated with the PKK and the DEM Party regarded Türkiye's request that the YPG-PYD/SDF comply with its agreement with Syria's new government as problematic. As such, they strongly criticized the government's efforts to ensure that the SDF joined the new Syrian government on the basis of equality and inclusion, and to promote unity and

solidarity in Syria, an approach that was not fully aligned with the spirit of the process.

In addition to these two points of contention, some DEM Party representatives disregarded the need to speak cautiously in the early stages of the resolution process, voicing demands that were not directly aimed at ending terrorism and making statements that increasingly frustrated the public. At the same time, a series of provocative statements and actions occurred in Parliament and in Diyarbakır. Under these circumstances, the public grew increasingly concerned about the nature and future of the process, causing the initial positive momentum to gradually slow.

Following the meetings, the relevant political parties prepared their own reports to present their views on the process.<sup>55</sup> These reports were expected to clarify each party's recommendations regarding the legal framework for the transition process aimed at ending terrorism, from a democratization-oriented perspective that would promote social harmony and the dissolution of the terrorist organization. It is important to note that some political parties did not follow these guidelines. For example, the CHP presented a broader framework, focusing on issues only indirectly related to the process, instead of sharing its specific perspective and offering concrete recommendations. In light of the judicial proceedings involving CHP-controlled municipalities, the party emphasized democracy and the rule of law in what

appeared to be an attempt to address its own challenges.

Meanwhile, the DEM Party repeated its longstanding positions on many of Türkiye's issues, employing the jargon of the terrorist organization, the PKK. It advanced a number of maximalist demands pertaining to broader issues, regardless of whether they were directly related to the question at hand. In effect, the DEM Party reduced the success of the process to Öcalan's future.

The reports of the AK Party<sup>56</sup> and the MHP<sup>57</sup> presented a framework that resembled earlier recommendations for the process to succeed. In particular, both reports addressed the questions of disarmament, the transition process, and its aftermath with concrete recommendations and explained in detail the various principles and institutional thresholds. Both political movements stressed that the process continued to be implemented as a state policy, recalling the red lines that had thus far been identified only verbally.

Following the identification of a terror-free Türkiye as the ultimate goal, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has been criticized for supposedly failing to share the planning, the roadmap, and the red lines with the general population. In this context, the AK Party's final report made three crucial issues concrete. First, the party identified an assessment and confirmation mechanism as a principled precondition for any political and legal steps to be taken. Spe-

cifically, its non-negotiable condition was that the terrorist organization's disarmament and self-termination be objective, measurable, based on concrete evidence, and open to judicial oversight.

Second, the report clearly explained what was meant by a "terror-free region" as an extension of a "terror-free Türkiye." Accordingly, it established that Türkiye's security required more than domestic precautions, as it reiterated the party's commitment to end PKK terrorism in Syria and Iraq as well. Last but not least, the report recommended that the legal basis of the process be established through a "longstanding and temporary law." This approach was significant, since it did not push the limits of the regular legal system and was therefore limited to the dissolution process. That this law would be temporary and limited in scope mattered because it prevented the exceptional nature of this process from becoming a permanent feature. Naturally, the principles and requirements that the AK Party set forth in its final report can be regarded as the following stages of this process.

## **Terror-Free Türkiye and the Future of the Region**

Terrorist organizations thrive in environments of chaos and instability. The PKK and its various affiliates, for example, exploited the prolonged turmoil across the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria. During the Syrian civil war, the organization's

Syrian branch, the PYD-YPG, seized control of significant territory. As the conflict deepened, the so-called SDF was formed under United States guidance, with the PYD-YPG at its core. It is important to recall that the PYD-YPG initially collaborated with the Baath regime at the outset of the civil war. The organization subsequently eliminated rival Kurdish factions and political actors, consolidating its monopoly over power. Equipped with Western-supplied weapons, it displaced ethnic and religious communities that refused to submit to its authority. Through violence and coercion, the group established so-called "cantons" and deliberately altered local demographics. It also seized oil production facilities and other strategic assets that belonged to the Syrian people as a whole, using the resulting revenues to entrench its control and oppress local residents.<sup>58</sup>

Following the downfall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the PYD and the SDF, both effectively controlled by the PKK leadership based in Qandil, Iraq, had a clear incentive to preserve instability. In a stable Syria with a legitimate central government and an inclusive political order, the SDF would cease to exist in its current form, particularly as an extension of PKK influence. Indeed, the PYD and the SDF never enjoyed a broad base within Syria. Their authority rested less on popular legitimacy than on coercion. Throughout the civil war, they relied on repression, violence, and sustained foreign military and financial assistance to maintain control over vast territories.

**The DEM Party advanced a number of maximalist demands pertaining to broader issues, regardless of whether they were directly related to the question at hand. In effect, the DEM Party reduced the success of the process to Öcalan's future**

The new Syrian government and the SDF/PYD signed an eight-point agreement on March 10, 2025. Among other things, the SDF accepted responsibility for ensuring that all civilian and military institutions be integrated into the Syrian state's administrative structures, as well as that all border crossings, airports, and oil and gas fields be handed over to the state. Under the agreement, this process was to be completed by the end of 2025.

Türkiye's initial response was to adopt a policy aimed at preventing Syria from descending back into chaos. In this regard, the country helped the new government in Damascus gain international legitimacy. Ankara also offered Syria diplomatic, economic, and logistical support to facilitate, among other things, the repatriation of Syrian refugees and the rebuilding of the Syrian state.

At the same time, Türkiye did not make any concessions from its own security-centric perspective with re-

## When the old regime fell, Türkiye urged the PYD/YPG militants to cease their terrorist activities and integrate into the new Syrian government in order to play a role in the future of the new Syria

guard to the dissolution or transformation of the PKK, the YPG, and the PYD. The key point was to ensure that the terrorist organization would be transformed into a non-terrorist entity that respected Syria's territorial integrity. Under the Turkish roadmap, foreign terrorist fighters from Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and the West who were still among the YPG's ranks were requested to leave Syria, along with the PKK's senior leaders. Additionally, it was possible for the PYD and other elements to serve under the new government as part of the Syrian security forces, provided that they respected Syria's territorial integrity.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan repeatedly stressed that the presence of multiple armed organizations within Syria's borders was unacceptable: "The YPG needs to see that there can't be two armed elements in any country, absolutely any country. Their armed elements must enter the command of the Syrian government."<sup>60</sup>

When the old regime fell, Türkiye urged the PYD/YPG militants to

cease their terrorist activities and integrate into the new Syrian government in order to play a role in the future of the new Syria. As a concrete example of this approach, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recalled that "Türkiye is the safeguard of the peace of all brotherly peoples in Syria, including the Kurds," and added: "Those who turn to Ankara and Damascus shall win. Those who forget their *qibla* and look for new foreign patrons shall lose. If the sword leaves its sheath, then there will be no room left for words. We advocate lasting peace."<sup>61</sup>

With the Terror-Free Türkiye process underway, one of the most significant discussions concerned whether Abdullah Öcalan's call on the terrorist organization to self-terminate and disarm also covered the PKK's Syrian component, the PYD/YPG.<sup>62</sup> During the previous reconciliation process aimed at ending terrorism, pro-PKK circles had sabotaged the disarmament talks, believing that they could carve out an autonomous region in northern Syria. As such, some groups made statements that threatened to derail the process and render it more fragile by hurling accusations at the Turkish government in defense of the PYD/SDF.

The DEM Party, in particular, attempted to deliberately blur the meaning of Abdullah Öcalan's statements. It also manipulated Türkiye's pressure on the PYD/SDF to fuel the claim that the Turkish government opposed the Kurds.<sup>63</sup> In truth, the PKK/YPG and similar organizations

have caused more harm to Kurds in Türkiye and Syria than any other terrorist group.<sup>64</sup> Just as the SDF's collapse would not be a loss for the Kurds, reducing the Kurds to a single organization was not a proper way of defending their interests.

Following the March 10 agreement, the Syrian government resumed negotiations for ten months, waiting for the SDF to comply with the terms. The SDF, however, was reluctant to respect the agreement, as it did not want Damascus to have full sovereignty and resorted to delaying tactics, hoping for some kind of instability. At the same time, the organization presented itself as more powerful than it actually was, signaling that it was a superior force with no viable alternative. Accordingly, the SDF believed that Israel's continued and destabilizing attacks strengthened its hand. When the Syrian government and Türkiye demanded that it comply with the terms, the SDF constantly threatened them with U.S. and Israeli intervention, making additional maximalist demands instead of living up to its commitments. In practice, SDF leaders pretended to embrace the March 2025 agreement in Damascus, yet continued to take orders from Qandil as soon as they returned to northern Syria, constantly making excuses.<sup>65</sup>

In the first days of 2026, the SDF refused to honor its agreement with Damascus, partly under pressure from the PKK leadership. Meanwhile, armed clashes in Aleppo's Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maksoud neighborhoods

caused the focus to shift from politics to military measures. Upon removing the terrorist organization from the city, the Syrian army proceeded to take control of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor. Once the Syrian military ended the PYD/SDF's control over Syria's sovereign territory, the group was forced to sign an 18-point agreement, with the United States acting as mediator.

In the end, the Syrian Democratic Forces could not get what they wanted, as the diplomatic efforts of Türkiye and Damascus paid off and curbed international support for the armed group. Consequently, SDF-controlled areas came under the Syrian government's control, as local tribes turned against the SDF once it lost its coercive power. After all, not only Arabs but also Kurds who did not share the PYD/YPG's ideology had been unhappy. Moreover, the SDF was compelled to accept the March 10 agreement, handing over oil fields and other resources to the Syrian government, which expedited the group's dissolution on the ground. Ultimately, Damascus grew stronger at home (in terms of political legitimacy) and abroad (*vis-à-vis* the regional balance of power).

Some members of the PKK who opposed the disarmament and dissolution process had shifted their attention to prospective autonomy in northern Syria, hoping that they could continue to exercise power in this area. After all, the majority of the SDF's decision-makers and armed militants (whom the group falsely

portrayed as local fighters) consisted of non-Syrian PKK members. Today, there is a new reality on the ground in Syria: the PKK-controlled SDF made a severe miscalculation by refusing integration with the new government in Damascus and disregarding repeated warnings from Türkiye and Damascus. Yet turmoil and chaos did not reemerge in Syria, leaving the SDF on the losing side. In the end, the group agreed to integrate into the government in Damascus, thereby making it impossible for the PKK to operate within Syria's borders.

The most recent developments in Syria created not only risks but also new opportunities for the overarching goal of a terror-free Türkiye and a terror-free region. At this point, the PKK and its armed and political affiliates have been deprived of propaganda opportunities both regionally and worldwide. After all, the new Syrian government joined the global anti-ISIS coalition, which means that the SDF can no longer use ISIS as an excuse. Damascus also gained control on the ground. Currently, a significant portion of ISIS fighters held in Syrian prisons are being transferred to neighboring Iraq. Meanwhile, the United States announced a plan to relocate its military bases in Syria to Jordan, pledging to provide additional support to the new government in Damascus.

In light of the new realities, the terrorist organization PKK has two options. Its first option is to concede that there is no room for terrorist organizations within the new regional

order and to resume the disarmament process. This approach promises to contribute to the success of the Terror-Free Türkiye process and to further expedite it. The second option involves the PKK repeating its old mistakes in Syria and attempting to derail the Terror-Free Türkiye process, now that its dream of governing an autonomous region in Syria has been shattered.

## Conclusion

Having come to power in 2002, the AK Party attempted to address Türkiye's longstanding problems while overseeing a paradigm shift aimed at ending terrorism. From 2009 onward, the Turkish government developed a new approach, officially called the National Unity and Fraternity Project and popularly known as the Democratic Opening Process, to address the terrorism issue. Making a clear distinction between the Kurdish question and the terrorism issue, it took highly significant steps toward democratization. The AK Party government also sought to neutralize attempts by the PKK and its political affiliates to obscure the terrorism issue.

Especially between 2012 and 2015, in what came to be known as the Resolution Process, Türkiye adopted legal and institutional reforms designed to end terrorism, creating new mechanisms to boost popular support. However, despite the determination of the Turkish state and the contemporary government, the terrorist

organization PKK derailed the resolution process and returned to violence, hoping to take advantage of the power vacuum that the Syrian civil war had created. The PKK's regional and global supporters, too, played an important role in the termination of this process. After the terrorist organization prematurely ended the resolution process, the Turkish state developed new concepts and conducted its counterterrorism campaign with an uncompromisingly security-centric approach.

Since 2024, the political parties that constitute the People's Alliance have been committed to a new political approach that aims at a terror-free Türkiye, with an eye on consolidating the home front. In addition to the domestic and cross-border success of the counterterrorism campaign, the increasing likelihood of a regional war in the Middle East exerted notable influence over the decision to launch a new process. Although this new approach benefited from the experiences accumulated during previous resolution processes, it was nonetheless shaped by contemporary realities. In this context, the government would not negotiate with the terrorist organization in any way, instead assigning the task of coordination for this state policy to the National Intelligence Organization. Moreover, the new process was designed as a multi-stage endeavor, whereby the PKK's disarmament was identified as the first step, following the creation of a new political climate through initial measures. In this context, following Abdullah Öcalan's call to action, the

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PKK convened its conference to pass a resolution for self-termination and held a weapon-burning ceremony to demonstrate that the disarmament process had begun.

As the Turkish authorities created the roadmap for this new process geared toward a terror-free Türkiye, they developed a Türkiye-specific model without disregarding global experiences. Whereas disarmament tends to represent the final stage in other cases, Türkiye identified the laying down of arms as the first step. At the same time, the country did not enlist the services of an international mediator or a so-called third party for this process, thus putting forward a strictly Turkish model.

The PKK remains among the longest-active terrorist organizations worldwide. Over the years, it has established various bodies to operate not only in Türkiye and neighboring countries but also in other parts of the world, starting with Europe. The organization's Iraqi, Syrian, and

## Once terrorism ends, Türkiye will freely discuss all issues relating to rights and liberties, as political parties share their visions and demands with the general population in a normalized political arena

Iranian components had been carrying out armed attacks against Türkiye for years. In this context, the country aimed to achieve the PKK's dissolution by taking various steps at home and abroad—especially in Syria—with an eye on the goal of a terror-free Türkiye.

Although the PKK's Syrian branch, the PYD/SDF, resisted integration into the new Syrian government for a long time, it was ultimately forced to reach a settlement in early 2026 under pressure from the Syrian government's military operations. From this perspective, this development represents new opportunities for the twin goals of a terror-free Türkiye and a terror-free region.

If Türkiye successfully reaches its goal of becoming completely terror-free, this will be due to several factors. Undoubtedly, Türkiye's successful counterterrorism campaign at home and abroad, the experiences it accumulated during the previous resolution processes, regional and global developments, that the AK Party government ended the policy of denialism,

and the various steps taken to safeguard rights and freedom in Türkiye would rank at the top.

At the same time, secondary factors included strong political leadership and the resulting long-term political and administrative stability, the iron will of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli, who voluntarily assumed potential political risks, the People's Alliance's unified policies, and strong coordination and co-operation among official institutions. Above all else, however, it is important to note that such new political initiatives were made possible by the AK Party's firm commitment to addressing the country's longstanding problems under Erdoğan's leadership and its ability to resolve crises.

Once terrorism ends, Türkiye will freely discuss all issues relating to rights and liberties, as political parties share their visions and demands with the general population in a normalized political arena. However, just as the pledges and demands of every party do not receive strong support in the social and political spheres, making marginal or disruptive demands would shrink the popular base of the parties that voice them. As such, they are unlikely to be raised at any point. ■

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